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ABSTRACT

A case study described the English literacy learning of two language minority students in a suburban kindergarten program in a predominantly white school district. Data collected throughout the school year indicated that weak home and school communication related to inaccurate interpretations of the children's literacy learning which led to inappropriate recommendations. Home and school recorded dialogue, written communication, in-depth unstructured interviews and participant observations (involving the one child's family from India and the other child's family of Cambodian and Vietnamese origins) demonstrated difficulties and confusion for parents and educators. Findings suggest that schools must take the first steps toward communicating with language minority families. (Contains 43 references.) (RS)

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Home/School Connection: The Vital Factor in Bilingual Ethnic-Minority Literacy Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to describe the English literacy learning of two language minority students in a suburban kindergarten program. Data collected throughout the school year indicated that weak home and school communication related to inaccurate interpretations of the children's literacy learning which led to inappropriate recommendations. Home and school recorded dialogue, written communication, in depth unstructured interviews and participant observations demonstrated difficulties and confusion for parents and educators.

Introduction

During a recent study in a Northeastern suburban kindergarten program, I observed two children of Southeast Asian and Indian origins as they interacted with students and staff to develop their English literacy. The children experienced cultural conflict and struggles during formal and informal literacy learning settings and holidays and classroom celebrations; also, home/school communication suffered. Based on the sociocultural perspective, children become literate within the cultures of their home and school communities which makes communication a vital factor between home and school (Heath, 1983; Reyhner & Garcia, 1989; Trueba, Jacobs & Kirton, 1990; Moll, 1992; Garcia, 1994, Edwards, in press). However, communication continues to suffer between home and school for language minority families. In an effort to better understand communication problems, there is a need to explore specific cases of weak home/school communication to discover patterns of dialogue between home and school (Edwards, Fear & Gallego,in press; Faltis, 1993; McCaleb, 1994). Therefore, the purpose of this case study is to present descriptions and dialogue between home and school which may give educators clues to create ways for strengthening home and school communication.

Related Research

It has been suggested that language minority children have great difficulties developing their literacies in the dominant American culture represented in classrooms (Au & Mason,1981; Cummins, 1986; Ogbu, 1987; McCaleb, 1994). Moreover, educators often ignore differences between home and school believing that language minority children will learn to "fit" into the classroom culture if given time (Edwards & Young, 1992; Faltis, 1993, McCaleb, 1994). Consequently, home/school communication is often weak or nonexistent and connections between home and

school suffer (Heath, 1983; Faltis, 1993; McCaleb,1994). The long term effect appears to be high school drop-out rates for language minority populations (Cummins, 1986; VerHoeven, 1987; Trueba, Jacobs and Kirton, 1990).

Additionally, researchers who examine early childhood literacy experiences (Wells, 1986; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Dyson,1989; Edwards,1992) perceive home/school connections as critical to the development of literacy learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Heath, 1983). Similarly, research demonstrates that early childhood, language minority literacy development relates to strong home/school connections (Garcia, 1986; Edelsky, 1986; Teale & Martinez, 1989; Reyhner & Garcia, 1989; Goldenberg, 1990). However, since home and school connections for language minority children can be problematic, there is a need for recording and analyzing home/ school communication in the first years of formal schooling to help educators understand how to strengthen connections (Faltis, 1993; McCaleb, 1994). Therefore, my analysis of home/school communication involving two language minority children and their families in a kindergarten program contributes information for developing strong connections between home and school.

Recent research also recognizes literacy learning as a social phenomenon which is best examined in the context of social situations (Bloome & Green, 1982). Therefore, ethnographic research was selected as the methodology which allowed me to observe and record data in a naturalistic setting. The year's "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) presented information in manner similar to a feature length film representation (Rist, 1978).

Methodology

Informants

Peley's Family

Peley's grandmother, mother, father and brother possessed short sturdy bodies, brown hair, skin and eyes, typifying their Cambodian and Vietnamese origins. The Lom family's appearance contrasted with the blond hair, pale-skin and blue-eyes of the people on the street. The family had lived in the area for more than two years, but they had not met the neighbors. Peley and her brother did not play with the children on the block. Peley's mother explained that the children on the school bus had mocked Peley about her flat nose causing her to insist that the school portrait be removed from the living room. Peley and her brother, a year older, played with their Cambodian or Vietnamese cousins on weekends. The children often watched television and rented cartoon videos.

Cambodian and Vietnamese dialects were spoken in the home. Because Peley had the best command of the English language, she took charge of the phone calls and answered the front the door. She helped her mother shop for food and household necessities at a local chain super market. They also drove to a Chinese grocery store to obtain special ingredients for their preferred recipes of their culture.

Peley and Peley's maternal grandmother were responsible for cooking, cleaning and preparing the children for school in the morning. Peley's mother worked the day shift and her father worked the night shift at a local medical instruments factory. Peley's brother Johnny and her father did not have specific household tasks, but Peley's father was responsible for the school communication since he was home during the day. However, this responsibility was difficult for him since he usually slept and his understanding of the English language was minimal.

Raji's Family

The Jon family emigrated from India and resided in an apartment complex which housed several other ethnic-minorities. Raji's mother, father and three year old

sister possessed a small bone structure with jet black hair, brown/black skin and eyes. Their appearance was not unusual for the complex, but they mentioned that Raji had experienced discrimination from white children at the play area. "White boys go first on the slide."

When a group of children found a tree frog, Raji was warned, "Black boys can't play with the frog." His parents were concerned about these incidents, but they hoped Raji would eventually work his way into a group of children and the discrimination would stop.

The family's English was grammatically correct and clearly spoken with only hints of an accent. The family also spoke two Indian dialects, Urdu and Hindi. They believed the children should know the dialects of their grandparents in India, since they visited for several weeks every other year. Raji's parents dressed as typical middle class professionals in the United States except for the diamond stud worn on the side of Raji's mother's nose. The family also celebrated the holidays unique to their religion and customs with other Indian families who resided in the area.

Raji's mother shopped and attempted to prepare foods similar to those eaten in Bombay, India. She cared for their apartment, her husband and children, and studied for the high school equivalency exam. Both parents always attended evening school activities. Since Raji's father was a highly regarded professional engineer for a local large company, he also usually took time from work and attended special school functions during the day.

Mrs. Starr

Mrs. Starr's blond hair, blue eyes and small frame were typical physical characteristics of teachers and parents in the school. She had always lived, studied and worked in European-American cultural settings. When Peley and Raji entered her

classroom, she expected them to assimilate. When they began to struggle, she attempted strategies learned in her teacher education program and previous classroom experience. When these strategies did not seem effective, she expected that the children only needed more time to fit in. Finally, she did not communicate as frequently with the language minority children's parents as she did with other parents because she feared they would not understand her. She realized that the two children's home languages and customs were different, but she was confused.

School Setting

Classmates. The children in this kindergarten program were from predominantly, white working class families. Peley and Raji appeared physically different in this classroom and school community where white skin, blond hair and blue eyes were the norm for students and staff. Also, their clothing contrasted with classmates. The female students had numerous colorful coordinated outfits resembling little women. The male classmates wore brand name trousers and jeans with jerseys of famous sport teams. Peley and Raji wore the same two or three sets of clothing throughout the school year.

The kindergarten program. The kindergarten program was created within a K-2 elementary school in a large, suburban, predominantly White school district in the Northeast. There were never more than five or six students of color in the total kindergarten program; they were divided among the three classrooms. Diversity of race and/or culture were not associated with appreciation for differences, but only related to federal or state guidelines for classroom pull-out programs, such as ESL, speech, and reading.

The kindergarten staff believed literacy learning was not simply reading and writing, but the meaning making which comes from successful social interactions

within the classroom community (Bloome & Green, 1982). Thematic learning centers, whole group mini-lessons followed by small group activities encouraged reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Theoretical Framework

Symbolic interactionism served as the theoretical framework based on the premise that the way people act depends on their interpretation of a situation and the meaning they give it. The meaning is derived from social interactions and modified through social process (Blumer, 1969). I became part of the kindergarten classroom environment and experienced "prolonged intense social interaction while collecting data systematically and unobtrusively" (Bogdan, 1972). A year of participant observations took place in the school two to three times a week during three hour sessions along with one to two hour monthly home visits. I attended field trips, evening events, field trips and parent conferencess. Field notes were recorded after all home and school visits. Also, hours of in depth, unstructured interviews of parents, educators and the two children were collected throughout the school year, as well as, documents, such as written home/school communication, student work, report cards, testing information and classroom materials.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing and continuous from the beginning of data collection, using the constant comparative methodology (Glaser, 1978). Data were read and reread for preliminary themes used in the analysis. As more data were considered, themes were refined to form the final coding categories. Recurring patterns offered explanations for the weak home/school communication which were grounded in the evidence of home/school dialogue and classroom experiences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Findings revealed that the families had difficulties communicating with the school about the ESL class, the children's social interactions and the children's academic progress. They also struggled with communication related to school activities. Similarly, the school staff had difficulties sharing their perceptions of academic and social progress with the children's families.

Home / School Communication

The kindergarten staff was proud of communication with kindergarten parents. They had created and designed a kindergarten program with home/school communication as a primary goal. To develop strong lines of communication, they made themselves available for scheduled and unscheduled conferences at school and on the phone. Notes from home were immediately answered and parents invited to observe, visit, participate and contribute in any way possible in the school or classroom. The staff planned special events which promoted parent involvement and even wrote a weekly newsletter which announced future classroom studies, events and important dates. Parents regularly appeared and were accepted without reservation. Home-school communication appeared to be strong. But as interested in home-school communication as the staff appeared, they were unable to successfully communicate with Peley's and Raji's families.

Family Communication

Peley's and Raji's parents had questions about the ESL program, academic progress and the children's social interactions, but they did not take the questions to school. Open houses, parent conferences and special school activities were also difficult for them. When the parents did attempt to communicate with the school, the communication was confused or misunderstood.

ESL Program

Students considered for the ESL program were also candidates for special services. Kindergarten screening, kindergarten teachers' judgements of classroom performance, reading teacher's and ESL teacher's testing and diagnoses and parental consent determined the amount of extra help language minority students could receive. Peley had told her mother she did not like ESL class. Her mother questioned:

> Peley not like ESL. Why? She need it. She speak good English. She not understand school way. My English not good. We work day. We work night. Peley need help. Our way different. Peley need ESL.

Peley's parents worked day and night shifts and did not have the time to communicate with the school. Also, they were unsure of their own English. They saw the ESL class as a way for Peley to succeed and fit into the ways of the United States.

Raji's parents also wanted him in the ESL classes until they learned that Raji had been missing reading class to attend ESL. They discovered this fact toward the end of the school year and were angry. Raji's father explained,

> Raji speaks English. Sometimes he does not say a word the right way, because of the way we say it, but he should not be away from reading class! He should be in ESL after school. What does the ESL teacher do in the class?

Raji's mother added, "I wish we knew about ESL class. We don't want him to leave reading!" They were frustrated with the lack of information about the ESL program and the fact that Raji had been taken out of the reading class.

Social Interactions

Both families had questions about Peley's and Raji's social interactions. Neither family asked the school about their children's struggles. Peley's mother knew Peley wanted a friend. "Peley want friend. Friend in school?" But Peley's mother did

not know how to help. By the end of the school year, Peley's mother was discouraged:

> I don't know friend. I don't know parent. We have custom. They have custom different. Peley don't understand. I don't know people. Not good. Peley have cousin. She see cousin, weekend.

Peley's mother feared that Peley would not understand the different cultures. She was unable to help Peley connect home and school with friendships; she was unable to communicate her questions concerning her daughter's friendships.

Raji's parents also knew that Raji did not have friends in school, but they noticed a change in his personality while in India. There, he had groups of cousins and friends to play on a daily basis. When he returned to his classroom in the United States, after two months in India, he displayed confident behaviors for a few weeks. However, his parents noticed that he soon returned to his shy reserved self. They did not contact the school to question his change in behavior. Raji's father explained,

> Raji played with cousins every day in India. Raji was part of their play. If he could find a group of friends here, he would not have trouble. In a group, he would be safe and have friends.
>
> Raji's parents did not know how to help him connect with the school and make friends nor did they know how to communicate their concerns to the school.

School Activities

Mrs. Starr encouraged parent involvement in school activities to strengthen the lines of communication between home and school. However, Raji's and Peley's families struggled with open house, parent conferences, and special events designed to connect the home and school.

Open house. The first fall meeting with parents took place "Open House" night in September of the school year. Both sets of parents came, but communication was

confusing. Mrs. Jon said nothing; Mr. Jon spoke to Mrs. Starr, "We want homework for Raji every night. We want to help him. We want him to listen in class. Please call us with any problem."

Raji's parents attempted to communicate with Mrs. Starr, but she remarked, "I don't think they understand kindergarten. They're putting too much pressure on their son. That's why he's so shy."

Peley's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Lom, nodded when Mrs. Starr recognized them, but they never spoke a word to her. Mrs. Starr guessed:

> Peley's family speaks almost no English. They didn't understand the open house, but I bet they direct Peley and tell her to please the teacher. She always tries to be near me and asks to help me.

Peley's family was unable to communicate, so Mrs. Starr was left to her own interpretations.

Parent conferences. The goal of the two scheduled parent conferences each year was to develop communication for stronger home-school connections and report on student progress, but these also proved to be confusing for the two families.

Raji's parents arrived fifteen minutes late for their 1:00 p.m. November appointment. Mrs. Starr explained to them that the conference would end at 1:30 p.m. since other parents were scheduled immediately after. Mr. Jon responded, "Fine, I could not leave my job when I wished, so that is why we are late."

Mrs. Starr proceeded immediately to explain the results of recent tests. She told them about Raji's abilities to recognize most body parts, numbers, letters, sounds and words. Finally, she praised Raji's coloring and neat work. A transcript of a portion of the conference demonstrates communication:

Mrs. Starr: Raji doesn't talk in class. He'll answer questions when I call on him, but

he would rather sit back and listen. He also doesn't talk to the other students.

Mr. Jon: He doesn't talk about school at home. He won't talk about it.

Mrs. Starr: Hmmmm. Really??? (Frowning) Well, he knows his numbers 1-10.

Mr. Jon: He knows 1-100 if he is asked.

Mrs. Starr: Fine! Do you have any questions?

Mr. Jon: We are going to India to visit family. I will go for two weeks and return to my job, but my wife, Raji and his sister will stay for part of December and part of January. I asked you to prepare work for him so he will not be behind in his class when he returns. My wife will work with him every day.

Mrs. Starr: Yes, I prepared a packet of material for Raji. I have included a list of children's books to read. He needs to study word families and sight words and sounds. Raji should write a sentence each day. Don't worry about his spelling. If he studies what I have given you, he will be able to catch up when he returns.

(Mrs. Starr quickly thumbed through the materials.)

Mrs. Jon: I would like the books on the list.

Mrs. Starr: Oh no! I can't give them to you. We don't have enough copies, but you might find them in the public library. Oh! Dear! It's time for my next conference. Good luck! Enjoy your trip! If Raji spends time every day on the packets, he may not miss too much. We'll try to catch him up with the class when he returns.

The Jons thanked Mrs. Starr and left the room. They did not communicate about their trip to India even though they believed it would be an excellent experience

for Raji. He would become reacquainted with his relatives and learn about the country of India. Mrs. Starr didn't ask about their trip. Her major concern was Raji's absence from school.

The fall parent conference also caused communication struggles for Peley's parents. Mrs. Starr attempted to schedule a conference, but they did not appear. She had sent a note home with the date and time, but the parents did not respond. Then she tried calling the home and finally scheduled a conference with Peley's mother. On the day of the conference, Mr. Lom came an hour late. He walked into the room and attempted to talk with Mrs. Starr while she was conferring with another parent. Mrs. Starr stated with exasperation, "You are late. I cannot see you now. I am talking with other parents. I will send you the papers. If you or your wife have questions, you can contact me." She handed Mr. Lom the papers; he bowed slightly, smiled and left. Mrs. Starr was startled with this encounter. "I don't understand how he could get so messed up. He doesn't understand!"

Later in the week, Mr. Lom brought back the information at the end of the school day and said, "Better to send home. I work night. Wife work day." When Mrs. Starr asked if he had questions, he said, "No." Mrs. Starr was pleased that they had finally worked out the parent conference, but no other conferences were scheduled during the school year.

Peley's parents and Raji's parents wanted to communicate with the school, but language and understanding of the school made this difficult. Raji's father stated, "I hope the teacher understands. I want our son to learn. I want him to have friends. I want him to enjoy school. My wife reads with him at night. My wife and I want our son to be successful in the school."

Peley's mother said, "We not understand how American school. My husband

not good student, afraid school. Peley smart girl. We want good student. How?"

Mrs. Lom knew she wanted her daughter to do well in school, but she was confused about how to follow her progress.

Special school activities. Special school activities were created and designed to involve parents in the school to strengthen home-school communication. Peley's and Raji's families were not as actively involved as other families. Peley's father was available during the day, but attended few of the functions. Raji's parents came to school for most of the daytime and evening activities, but Mrs. Jon was not one of the corps of volunteer mothers who helped teachers in class activities. She knew enough about the classroom to bring in the typical cupcake birthday treats for Raji's birthday.

On the other hand, Peley's birthday was a sad occasion. It occurred on a Saturday, so Mrs. Starr sent a note home telling the parents that Friday would be the day to bring in refreshments during snack time. On Friday, the class sang to Peley and placed a birthday crown on her head, but no refreshments arrived. On Monday morning, Mr. Lom brought graham crackers for Peley's birthday. Mrs. Starr remarked, "The note was simply written. I wonder if Peley took it home?"

At the end of the school year, the two families attended kindergarten graduation. However, as was typical throughout the school year, they did not interact with other families in the classroom. They usually came late and stood in a corner talking softly with their children. Peley's grandmother brought graham crackers to share at the graduation party, because the word "refreshments" appeared on the invitation. She held her brown bag and gave it to Peley to take to the refreshment table covered with a sheet cake, cookies and punch bowl. Peley spoke sternly in the Cambodian language and her grandmother put the graham crackers away. Peley realized that her family

had misinterpreted the invitation.

Both families made efforts to attend special school activities but both families experienced difficulties in communicating with the school. Both families had many unanswered questions at the end of the school year. Peley's mother asked, "Peley good student? Peley learn? Next year, good teacher? Peley, ESL class?"

Raji's mother asked, "Can I be a room mother? How do you ask?" Raji's father stated and questioned, "Raji can be in ESL class if it is before school or after school. Who will be his teacher? Why must he go to the summer program to study reading and writing?"

The two language minority families wished to be a part of their children's schooling, but they did not know how to communicate with the school to make the necessary connections.

School Communication

School staff communicationwith the parents was often strained or non-existent. Mrs. Starr expressed her feelings about communication, "It's so hard to get them to understand. It's a shame. I wish I could talk with them." Staff perceptions of Peley and Raji, staff awareness of the children's social interactions and staff evaluations of the children's literacy learning were not communicated to the families.

Staff Perceptions

While other children's parents were contacted when the staff perceived social, emotional or academic problems, Peley's and Raji's parents were not notified.

Peley. The staff perceived Peley as a difficult child, prone to emotional outbursts. Mrs. Starr reported at the beginning of the year:

> She doesn't have a friend, but she's always trying to please me. She tries to be so perfect. Any job or errand is done perfectly without a word said.

Sometimes, I think she'd like to explode.

Another kindergarten teacher commented, "Peley is so strong willed. She can't stand any criticism, no matter how small. She pouts or explodes when I try to help her."

During the fall pumpkin farm kindergarten trip, the staff negative perceptions increased. When she entered the animal barn at the farm, she began complaining about the smell with her head bent toward the ground, "Yuck, the smell makes me sick. I'm damn sick. My mother told me it smells." Mrs. Starr came to her rescue and offered a stick of gum. Peley put the gum in her mouth and began to lift her head. Mrs. Starr questioned, "Now what did your mother tell you?" Peley replied, "This place is yuck! I hate the smell! " The staff was annoyed with her loud behavior which caused other children to be distracted from the cows, horses and chickens.

The ESL teacher, Mrs. Brown, also remarked regularly about Peley's behaviors, "Peley wants to run the class. Peley's brother is very different. He's calm and quiet. He writes every day in his classroom about how he dislikes his sister. She's a tyrant at home."

Raji. Mrs. Starr echoed the perceptions of many staff members when they discussed Raji.

> I wish I could reach Raji. He always seems so distant; he doesn't speak up in class. I see him as a brilliant little boy who stands back and watches and figures everything out. I worried about him all year, because I didn't see him with a friend.

Mrs. Gerard, the teaching assistant, stated that she thought Raji had language problems. "He tries to describe something and he doesn't quite know the names for it." Mrs. Starr added,

When I asked him about the fire trucks we saw at the fire station on our field trip, he didn't seem to be able to tell me about the ladders, poles or hoses. It was like he didn't understand the whole idea of firetrucks in a fire station.

The other teaching assistant, Mrs. Fazer commented, "I think he has a word retrieval problem. He can't seem to label common nouns."

Because the school staff did not communicate their perceptions of Peley and Raji to the parents, the children's struggles may have been perpetuated.

Social interactions

The teachers were concerned about Raji's and Peley's social interactions, but they were not discussed with the parents. They saw atypical dress as a contributing factor. They also knew small group interactions were problematic, but they were unaware of the specifics of the interchanges in those groups.

Clothing. Peley's and Raji's dress was not typical of the kindergarten classroom. Their classmates wore miniature versions of adult fashions along with clothing based on popular television and movie characters. The girls wore the latest Littlest Mermaid ensembles, colored tights and brightly oversized sweaters, high top sneaker, flats and lace stockings. The boys wore Ninja Turtle outfits, bugle boy trousers, high top sneakers and sweatshirts representing national athletic teams.

Peley's and Raji's clothing was usually a size too small and were not the colors or styles commonly worn by the rest of the class. Blacks, reds and medium blues dominated Raji's wardrobe. Two heavy wool sweaters, too tight fitting corduroy or cotton slacks, socks and grey and black sneakers with velcro straps were common attire. Mrs. Starr remarked, "He always wears that same blue and red sweater no matter what the temperature indoors or out."

Peley wore tight fitting, ankle high, stone washed jeans and a turtle-neck, long-

sleeved, cotton-knit, sweater with a purple belt. She was the only child with pierced ears, wearing gold earings. Her long, black, silky, braided pony tail was held with unusual plastic glittery bowlike clasps.

Friends. Neither child seemed to have consistent friends throughout the school year. The teachers guessed that their personalities may have contributed to lack of social interactions. Mrs. Starr also noticed that the kindergarten children often invited friends to their homes. There was no such invitations for Peley and Raji. Mrs. Starr did not communicate with Peley's family about school friendships.

Mrs. Starr became puzzled about Raji's social interactions when he returned from India. For the first few weeks back, he was boisterous, verbal and friendly. He talked with the other children, asked questions, and laughed aloud. He expressed his ideas. "I like that! That's funny!" Why did you do that?" However, within two weeks Mrs. Starr observed, "He went back into his shell." He stopped contributing to class discussions and talking to the other children. Mrs. Starr couldn't understand Raji's changes. She didn't communicate with his parents concerning the changes.

Peley began the school year unable to make a friend. She was critical of other students and their work. Consequently, her classmates either spoke harshly to her or attempted to stay away from her avoided her. Annie was the one exception. Peley began bringing Annie small gifts from home, such as plastic ornate hair clasps and empty perfume bottles. Mrs. Starr saw Peley's efforts and paired her with Annie during learning centers. However, the relationship ended when Annie was invited to a birthday party and Peley was not. Peley's screaming and sobbing frightened Annie; she avoided Peley for the rest of the year.

Small group interactions. Observations of social interactions in the small groups revealed that Peley and Raji received negative responses from the children.

Mrs. Starr and other staff members knew that Peley and Raji were not accepted, but they were unaware of the frequency of their classmates' negative responses. The following portions of dialogue excerpted during the month of June were typical throughout the school year.

(At the sand and water table, Raji began to take apart a plastic boat.)

Brian: Don't break it!

Raji: We can take it apart. It goes back.

James: (looking at Raji.) You're a troublemaker. You cause trouble. You're a problem!

Raji moved to the corner of the table and left the boat behind. Brian began to take the boat apart while Annie and James watched. No comments were made. Mrs. Starr noticed Raji in the corner but she did not know what had taken place.

Peley also had problems with social interactions, but she seemed to initiate the negative. In the block center, she usually made herself boss.

Peley: I am the boss. We can build a big house.

Jeannie: No, I want a castle.

Billy: I build a bridge for traffic.

Peley: I am strong. I can beat my brother.

Jimmy: Who cares! Stay away!

When it was time to pick up, Peley would skip off to the bathroom. The other children would comment. "We do all the work. She's a dumb boss."

Evaluating literacy learning.

At the end of the school year, standardized testing by the reading teacher, ESL teacher and classroom teacher produced recommendations for the summer literacy maintenance program at school and summer day camp for Peley and Raji. Even

though Peley was reading Dr. Seuss books and could read most of the reading material in the first grade literature based reading series, the teachers believed she needed help in maintaining their English literacy learning during the summer months. They also believed that both children needed contact with other children to practice socialization skills. Finally, the staff strongly suggested that Peley and Raji continue receiving special help from the ESL teacher in first grade.

Raji's parents were informed about the staff recommendations during the last few weeks of the school year when they were called to meet with Mrs. Starr. They discovered then that Raji was leaving reading class twice a week to attend ESL class. They expressed concerns about his test scores as they related to missing reading, "We do not want Raji to attend such a class next year during the school day. He is missing his school work. We don't know what he learns in ESL class."

Raji's parents agreed to send Raji to the school's summer literacy maintenance program, which meant canceling his registration in a summer camp. They made the decision to not allow Raji to go to ESL in first grade unless it was an after school program. They believed Raji's literacy had suffered due to the ESL pull-out. They did not inform the school of their decision until the fall.

Mrs. Starr also did not communicate with Peley's parents at the end of the year. She explained to Peley that she should read books over the summer and suggested that she attend a community day camp.

While other children's parents were contacted when the staff perceived problems during the school year, Peley's and Raji's parents were not. Because the home-school communication was weak, the children's English literacy learning progress was ignored.

Discussion

The purpose of this case study was to analyze the home/school communication between the school staff and two language minority families. The school did not communicate effectively with either family during the school year. The families did not communicate effectively with the school. As a result, the language minority children's classroom struggles did not receive the attentions other children might have experienced.

Language in written and oral communication seemed to hinder connections between home and school. Raji's and Peley's family misinterpreted written and oral communication. Raji's parents spoke English fluently, but they believed that Mrs. Starr did not understand what they were saying. Peley's family realized that their communication in English was a problem, so they had to rely on their daughter's interpretations. They also had questions and concerns about school, but were not able to be heard.

The kindergarten staff communicated with parents through the weekly newsletters, notes, phone calls, conferences and special school activities, but Mrs. Starr did not voice her concerns about Peley and Raji because she believed the parents might not understand. She explained, "I just don't know how to tell them." She believed Peley's parents had extremely limited English; they rarely spoke to her and usually smiled and nodded whenever she spoke. They also missed many school activities or arrived hours or days late. Similarly, she believed Raji's parents did not understand schools in this country. "They don't realize that Raji needs to make friends and practice his English."

Mrs. Starr saw both families attempting to be a part of the school when they attended school functions. She believed that parent presence at school events was a

sign of parental interest , but she did not know how to communicate with the families to strengthen home/school connections.

Implications

This study is consistent with the research which implies that language minority children's literacy learning is adversely affected when home and school communication is weak (Au & Mason, 1981; Reyhner & Garcia, 1989; Quintero & Huerta-Macias, 1990; Goldenberg, 1990). The year's descriptions of home/school communication gives us a picture which appears to recommend that parents and communities must play major roles in the schooling of language minority children (McCaleb, 1994).

Research supports the idea that parents of language minority students are genuinely interested in their children's schooling, but difficulties communicating with the school prevent their involvement (Olson, 1990). Therefore, the school must reach out to the parents for effective communication (Ogbu, 1983; McCaleb, 1994).

Similar to Clay's investigations of parental school support of language minority children (1971), the parents in this study seemed to want their children to fit into the school culture. However, these parents did not engage in communication about their children's programs or progress during most of the school year. The school staff was concerned about Peley and Raji, but did not communicate their concerns to the parents. The teachers in this study may have benefitted from regular dialogue with the parents, but this was considered too difficult. If home/ school communication had been strong, the children's struggles may have been avoided.

Recommendations for this kindergarten program would include the use of translators at parent conferences and any other formal informational meetings about

materials and curriculum. Even when knowledge of the English language appears to be excellent, communication may be hampered due to cultural misunderstandings Faltis, 1993). Volunteer interpreters can often be found in university or religious sites.

Recommendations for the development of language minority home/school communication in this kindergarten program could be adapted from McCaleb (1994), Faltis (1993) and Au (1993) suggestions. The following are a possible sequence of steps:

1. Initially, the teacher and school staff would reach out to develop trust. Frequent informal meetings at home or school would encourage the sharing of knowledge to form a comfortable bridge. The teacher could also engage in a specific cultural study to demonstrate a sincere interest in the home. (Culturegrams offer a convenient format for reading about basic cultural information.)

2. Next, small informational meetings about the school curriculum, special events and student progress would occur in school or in the home. The teacher may send newsletters and notes, telephone the family and visit the home to inform them of school and community activities. Additionally s/he may search for culturally related literature and other classroom materials and ask for parental responses.

3. Parent participation and sharing in the classroom occurs easily when the school and family have developed a positive relationship and communication seems strong. The teacher may ask parents to observe, help or share information about their cultures in the classroom making them the primary informational sources about the literature, holidays and celebrations in their culture.

4. Parents become empowered when they are actually included in curricular decisions about their children's schooling. They feel confident when meeting with school staff and administration and are able to be strong advocates for their children.

If Peley's and Raji's parents and Mrs. Starr had systematically attempted to communicate in the manner recommended, the children may have been saved from the difficulties they experienced and there would have been a more complete understanding of their English literacy learning.

Finally, this kindergarten study implies that schools must take the first steps toward communicating with language minority families (Jacobs & Sanday, 1976; McCaleb, 1994). Reaching out to the families and sharing knowledge connects home and school and empowers the children for successful English literacy learning and school achievement (Hoffman, 1989; Tan, 1992). Teacher education programs must also prepare preservice teachers to communicate effectively with language minority families to enhance their children's literacy learning (Garcia, 1986; Trueba, Jacobs & Kirton, 1990). Furthermore, I hope that the information learned from students and staff in this kindergarten program may serve to alleviate future struggles for their language minority children and children in similar programs.

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